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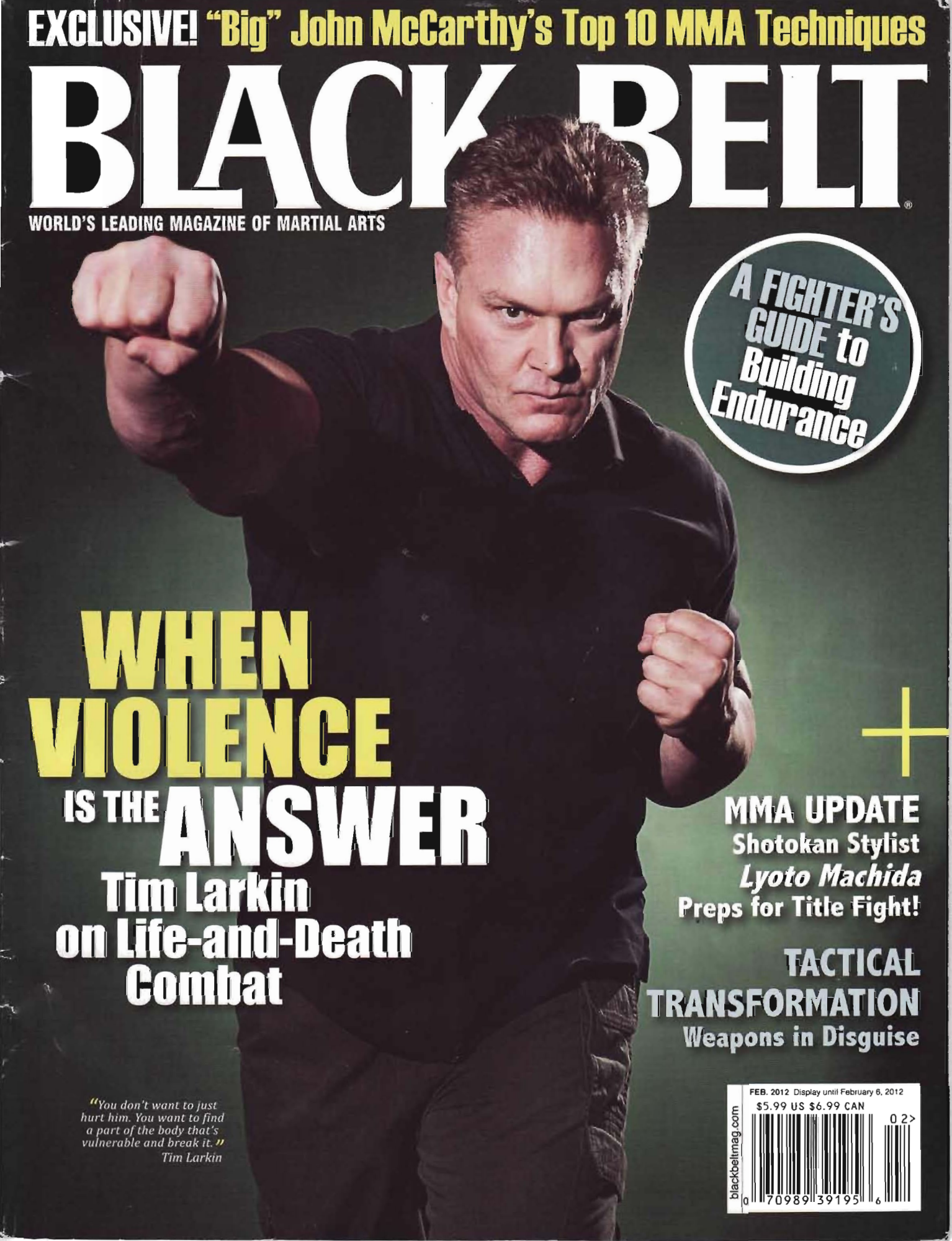

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A Cut Above the Rest

It's one thing to practice a Philippine martial art with sticks, imitating the movements of swordplay and imagining you're cleaving an opponent in two with a live blade. It's another to hold a Philippine sword in your hand, to hear the swish as it slashes figure-8 patterns. It's an even more impressive experience when that *ginunting*—a slightly concave bladed weapon designed for hacking—is made of high-quality steel and shows expert craftsmanship.

by Mark Jacobs

Ron Kosakowski knows a thing or two about using those blades. Besides being a longtime practitioner of the Philippine arts, he runs the Connecticut-based Traditional Filipino Weapons, a company that imports a variety of top-notch bladed weapons from the Philippines. Tune in to his YouTube channel, and you'll see him demonstrate why the ginunting is the official edged weapon of the Philippine marines as he cuts through an entire leg of lamb, thigh bone and all, in one swift motion.

"I kind of surprised myself when I did it in one cut," Kosakowski said, "but the sword went right through it like butter."

KOSAKOWSKI'S INTRODUCTION to the Philippine arts came in the 1970s, when he began training in *kun tao*. Although the nation's fighting systems go by a variety of names, kun tao is the generic term for those that bear a Chinese influence.

"The reason there are so many variations of kun tao is that a lot of Chinese styles have been transported throughout Southeast Asia," he said. "So kun tao is just a generic term like 'kung fu.'"

Although different translations for the name exist, Kosakowski said his style, kun tao *dumpag*, means "nasty art with dirty tricks." It's very close-quarters oriented, but it's not a wrestling style. "It's more about leverage and pain compliance," he said. "If someone clinches with us, we're going to bite."

KOSAKOWSKI EXPANDED his knowledge of the Philippine arts under such noted instructors as Dan Inosanto and Leo Gaje. It was because of Gaje that he began traveling to the Southeast Asian country 10 years ago. On his first trip, he lived in the jungle with members of the military, spending his days hitting banana trees with a stick and his nights sleeping in a bamboo hut under a mosquito net.

On a subsequent trip, Kosakowski told Gaje he'd like to learn more about the background of kun tao dumpag, and Gaje suggested they travel to the southern island of Mindanao, where they believed the art had its roots. Such an undertaking was not to be taken lightly.

THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES is a primarily Muslim region, one that's in a constant state of tension with the Christian-dominated north, which governs the country. Abu Sayyaf, a terrorist

Photo Courtesy of Ron Kasakowski

"Forando has even gone to local museums in the Philippines to study ancient weapons collections in an attempt to reproduce, in the most authentic way possible, a variety of exotic blades."

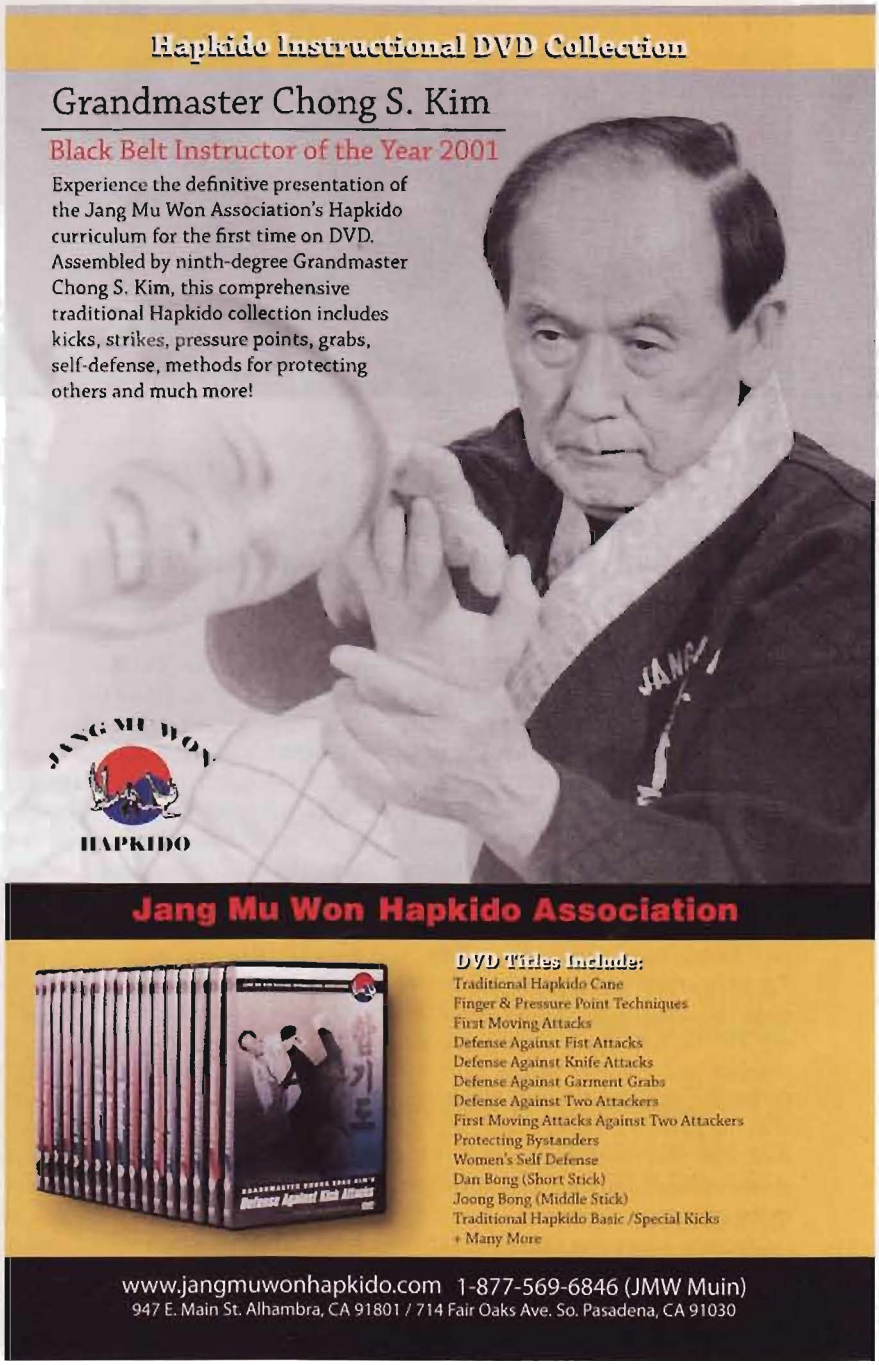
group associated with al-Qaida, has a formidable presence in Mindanao. For safety, Kosakowski and Gaje traveled with a dozen special-forces soldiers.

"We went to Cotabato, an old Spanish fort city," Kosakowski said. "We met with a tribe down there that supposedly practiced kun tao, but they were very wary of me because I wasn't Filipino or Muslim. One of the elders was willing to demonstrate some of their style to us, but the younger people didn't like that we were there with the military. We got woken up in the middle of the night by the soldiers, who said they were expecting trouble and we had to get out of there. We took off in the jeeps at about 140 miles an hour."

In retrospect, Kosakowski said traveling with the military may have been more of an impediment than an aid, making people who might have been receptive distrustful of him. "It doesn't matter if you're in the north or south over there; they're very friendly people," he said. "The only problems come from the people who have nothing. They're angry and feel the government is to blame."

KOSAKOWSKI MANAGED to meet several kun tao instructors and continue his training. Just as important, though, is what happened on a trip eight years ago. That's when he met swordsmith Daniel Forando. Forando's family had been involved in metal work for generations. When Kosakowski saw the quality of the weapons he made, he struck a handshake bargain to begin importing his blades into the United States.

Traditionally, high-quality Philippine blades haven't been easy to come by—there or in the States. "Collecting Philippine swords and knives is very hit and miss," said *Black Belt* Hall of Fame weapons instructor Michael D. Janich. "Even over there, a lot of what you see are just 'wall hangers' meant for show and not use."

But the blades Kosakowski imports are as functional as they are stylish—as demonstrated by that butchered leg of lamb. He exports quality steel to the Philippines for Forando's use, which makes his blades sharper and sturdier than the competition. Forando has even gone to local museums in the Philippines to study ancient weapons collections in an attempt to reproduce, in the most authentic way possible, a variety of exotic blades.

Janich, who owns 300 knives and swords, said the four items he's acquired from Kosakowski's company stack up well against any of the traditional blades in his collection. "They're as good as what I've got or better," he said. "It's not just the blade but all the little details. The handles are sturdy for real functionality, the finish is more polished and the sheaths are done with refined workmanship. They're a cut above the rest—no pun intended."